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**Highlights, challenges and elements for a master plan for the future
of theological education in Sri Lanka**

Introduction:

At the very outset we wish to state that the emphasis of this paper is to examine the Challenges & Opportunities to engage in alternate theological education for the promotion of fuller life; to protect & empower vulnerable groups in present day Sri Lanka to become creators of their destiny. We present this paper under four sub titles, namely, an imposed divided western Church, Church and formal theological education, signs of the times, and alternate theological education.

An imposed divided Western Church:

According to oral, archaeological and written sources, there had been a Christian presence in Sri Lanka in the early period from 6th to the 9th century. The Persian traders who were a persecuted group brought this type of Christianity. They co-existed with people who had different religions. They didn't become a threat because they didn't *advocate* crusading Christianity. However, the scenario changed with the arrival of three European powers from the beginning of the 16th century until they left in mid 20th century. During this period, these imperial powers' not only captured the country, but also introduced a divided Church with many forms of Christianity. The missionaries that came with these colonial powers looked down on the civilisations, languages and religions of the people in our countries.³ They used tools to uproot the Christians and Church from the national soil. Dr. D. T. Niles referred to the Church in Asia as a potted plant, and challenged to plant the Church in Asian soil. Most of the Christians followed and continue to follow the western type of Christianity and their agenda of crusading against faiths of the people without questioning. The people in Sri Lanka *have* a memory about the atrocities done to *native* religions.⁴ This memory is vital as it *gives* an opportunity to the Church to engage in critical self-examination. The Church in general has inherited a western legacy. There is a need to work towards a united Sri Lankan Church for a Sri Lankan people. It is only then the wounded memory of the people in Sri Lanka could be healed. The people of the land will not forgive the Church in Sri Lanka, if this doesn't happen very quickly. It is already late.

These different types of Christianity had their own theological training, either in the European soils or at Bishop's College, Calcutta, Serampore College or United Theological

College in Bangalore. When the Churches in Sri Lanka were thinking of Church Unity, the Sri Lankan leadership felt the need to have one theological college where all their candidates could be trained together. The Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa was formed in 1963 for that purpose and to carry out theological training in swabasha⁵.

Church and Formal Theological Education:

Formal Theological Education takes place in classroom set up where a set curriculum is followed. The main subjects that are taught are in the areas of

- >- Bible - Old Testament, New Testament
- >- Theology - Systematic Theology, Contextual Theologies
- >- Church History - (some Colleges have opted to teach History of Christianity instead of Church History), Ecumenical Relations among Christian Communities is an optional subject for The Senate of Serampore College at B. Th. Level - the first degree
- >- Other Faiths - Outline of Major Religions, Buddhism, Hinduism & Islam (Even the terminology 'Other Faiths' is looking down on different living faith traditions. A terminology like 'Diverse Faiths' should be considered for this discipline.
- >- Pastoralia - Preaching & Worship (Liturgy)

Although, Contextual Theologies such as Asian Theology and Sri Lankan Theology are subjects in the curriculum, it seems that due emphasis is not given to it and there is not enough motivation in the Churches and theological colleges for these subjects to challenge. The trend in general seems to be the Church and the dogmas it has inherited are considered an end in itself. The activity of the Holy Spirit has been restricted up to a certain period in the various denominational traditions and the continuing movement and revelations of the Spirit is not accepted. It seems that many have failed to acknowledge that Church is only an instrument of God in God's mission to the world - *kosmos*. The priority is given to the Church and not to mission of God, for which the Word - Jesus - incarnated in the world.

Because of this understanding that prevails in the Church, there seems to be a tendency to undermine the importance of formation in Theological education. One gets the impression that the Churches in general are mostly interested in maintaining the structures and i Church Growth, and not mission. The impact of globalization has entered the Churches recently. Neo-colonial powers emphasis on Church planting and Church growth. So much funds are poured in to the country and the Churches are getting fragmented. Many Bible schools and theological colleges emerge in Sri Lanka. There are tensions between them as well. Some Theological Colleges have initiated a programme to teach a course on Church Growth as pressure has been brought by some Churches through the Board of Governors have such a course. Theological College of the mainline Churches is considered a facto that manufacture stereotyped articles for the consumers i.e. clergy for the Churches with the raw material they give to the Theological Colleges.

While it is important to read and re-read the Bible and the Church dogma, it is equal important to read the signs of the times as Jesus read the signs of the times of his day. Jesus understood his task - responsibility in obedience to God after reading the signs of the time. Jesus had the openness to critically evaluate the society of his day; exclusive and segregated communities which failed to integrate with people who didn't reach their standards. Jesus in obedience to God took steps through his words and deeds to create inclusive communities where people could live with dignity and equality. In this way, Jesus responded to transform lives and communities from being exclusive to inclusive. The Christian belief is that the world belongs to God and God loves and cares for God's creation. Unless there is spirituality to read the signs of the times, the relevance of the Church will be lost. The statement made by Karl Marx in the 19th century, 'religion is the opium of the people' echoes in our ears. Hence, a brief survey of the background in which Theological education takes place needs examination.

Signs of the times:

Sadly the political situation is worsening every day in Sri Lanka. Between December 2005 and February 2007 the UN reported 670 civilians killed.⁶ September 2007, the total number of IDPs in Sri Lanka stood at 503,000,⁷ Suicide attacks are becoming a routine even in tightly secured areas in and around Colombo. Recently